

EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN INDIAN WRITING THROUGH THE POSTCOLONIAL LENS

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ABSTRACT

English as a language has undergone many fundamental and linguistic changes over the ages. From Old English, or Anglo-Saxon that was spoken in England and Scotland in the early Middle ages, to the Middle English, which underwent a lot of changes after the Norman conquest until the late fifteenth century. English saw many changes during the Renaissance all through to the modernist period to finally become what it is today. English, consequently, emerged as a language that is ever-changing in nature, a language that adapts and accommodates all. One such evolution in the language can be seen through the postcolonial experience of the former British colonies. The adoption of English in India, like other colonies, was a result of the Raj. Indian writing in English emerged as an honest enterprise that has turned out to be a new form of Indian culture and voice that has been adopted and adapted by the native people. Indian writers- poets, novelist, essayists and dramatists, have been making great contributions to world literature while gaining immense recognition and fame. It has achieved independent stature in world literature. Subsequently, the use of English became essential for postcolonial writers as it works towards the enlightenment of both the colonizer and the colonized about the 'Self and the 'Other'. This paper attempts to highlight the evolution of the English language by navigating through the postcolonial narrative of writers who have not only adopted the language but also have changed it.

KEYWORDS: English Language, Postcolonial, Indian Writing in English, Postcolonial Canon

Introduction

The act of writing of any kind, be it imaginative or realistic, always involves some kind of expressions and words that may set the tone of the text. The author's choice of words and expressions, in any language, may or may not be a conscious decision, but it ends up influencing the text and the reader's reception of it. The act of writing can be for various purposes, or it can be for none. It can be a cathartic act of expression or be informative. It can be instructive as well as suggestive and imaginative. It can have the connotations of the external reality as being experienced or a way of tracing the internal and psychological realities and subjectivity. The medium of expression, in whatever for it may be, can then have varied functions and aims.

The use of language as a medium, among all the other mediums of expressions, can be regarded as an effective demonstration of blending of various cultures. Art thrives through originality in order to communicate meaning and be more innovative and enlightening, and language becomes this personalized medium that sorts to accommodate and reflect another culture. Moreover, when the writer writes to express a reaction to something or someone, use of a medium that conveys this reaction becomes necessary.

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When we hear the term “postcolonial” the immediate assumption is that it has a connection with colonization and, in turn, decolonization. We cannot rule out these features of post colonialism but we need to talk about all the things that this umbrella terms entails and how it came to being.

The basic idea behind this term is perhaps the deconstruction of an orthodox perception held by the ones in power over the ones who are, or have been, oppressed. Postcolonial studies, as M. H. Abrams points out in his book *The Glossary of Literary Terms*, are a way to critically analyze the “history, culture, literature, and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, France, Spain and other European imperial powers (Abrams, 2020).” By this definition it is made clear that the term “postcolonial” has its origins in colonialism and imperialism. At the same time, the use of such a term to demarcate the literature, culture and history of the colonies and the colonizers is done mostly by the people with power, who came to be known as “the west”, who have represented and narrated the histories of these colonies from their own perspective.

Review of Literature

The categorizing of “the west” and “the east” has helped us to distinguish the third world oppressed countries and the powerful developed first world countries. This categorization has led towards a clear hierarchy between the two, making the later more superior than the former. In relation to this, Edward Said has spoken about “cultural imperialism” in his book *Orientalism* (1978) which talks about how this mode of imperialism has aided the dissemination of the Eurocentric discourse in the subjugated which naturalizes the hierarchy between the “occident” and the “orient”, the latter being “exotic” and “inferior” to the former.

There was a rejection of this “master narrative” of the Western imperialism and it was replaced with the counter-narrative in which the colonial culture fights their way back in the world of the European histories. The influential book of 1989, *The Empire Strikes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1995), puts emphasis on the “hybridization” of the colonial languages and cultures “in which imperialist importation are superimposed indigenous tradition.” In this books, the empire is the sum total of the colonies of the British Empire, which Britain lost with the rise of the independence movements in its colonies. Salman Rushdie, one of the well-known postcolonial Indian writes, wrote an article in 1982 titled “The Empire Writes Back” where the notion of writing back to this empire emerges as the ‘counter’.

Many postcolonial theorist and writers have talked about the basics of these writings as a counter narrative of the ‘subaltern’. Frantz Fanon, a French psychoanalyst and philosopher, wrote a book called *The Wretched of the Earth* (3) (1961) where he talks about all the brutal realities of colonialism. He suggests that both, the colonizer and the colonized, are affected, corrupted or “implicated” by the horrors of imperialism and both have to be decolonized. He says that the colonized have to find a way of overcoming the impositions of the colonial rule, both over their physical territory and their minds and bodies. On the other hand, the colonizer has to question the need to use such brutality and justify it to their apparent humanism.

Fanon’s works emphasized on the complex and complicated relationship between imperialism and nationalism, which also remained a critical focus of the most of postcolonial writings. The rise of nationalism has been one of the main reasons behind the new found independence of the colonies. It emerged as a political and an intellectual movements in all these states. This, however, was challenged by some new and/or some historic entrenches after gaining the national independence.

Homi Bhabha is another important and well-known figure in the field of postcolonial studies. His contributions to this fields are many, including the development of the ideas like hybridity, mimicry, difference and ambivalence that have formed the bed rock of the struggle of identity of the colonized in face of the colonizers. While talking about “hybridization” (Anderson, 1983), Bhabha takes Said’s argument further and introduces the significance of multiculturalism and how in order to redefine the complex relations of the culture from both the foreign and the native, it is important for us to look at this hybridized culture.

Justification

The use of English as language to respond to the Eurocentric discourses, however, remains a debatable issue. Many postcolonial theories and writers believe that language has a cultural marker that cannot be transformed or translated into a foreign language. The Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o maintains that “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orator and literature,

the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (Ngugi, 1986)" While this is undeniable, the scope of language can be much more expansive than the cultural marker of a particular people.

Language is not only capable of communication between different cultures, but is also helps in revealing the in-depth similarities and differences between them. It becomes a suitable medium to 'counter' to the hegemonic preconceived impressions about the colonized. This accords with Edward Said's notion of the "strategy of resistance" (Said, 1978) where he suggests that while entering into the discourse of European and the West one must mix with it and transform it so that it can acknowledge the marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories. He further suggests that this mixing with the hegemonic narrative and discourses to make it more accommodative may lead to a more humanistic community where "cultural hybridity and multiple identities" prevail (Said, 1978). Thus, a language like English, which is more susceptible to change and development, can play a significant role in representing the national and international identities in global world of increasing interaction.

The writing witnessed three phases of evolution. The first phase saw the beginning of the distinct literary trends that took place in 1830s with the Bengal Renaissance till the end of the nineteenth century. The second phase, from 1900s to late 1940s, was the period of India's anti-imperialist National Movement necessitating a general overall upsurge in the mass awakening and literary writing. And the third phase came post-independence in the 1950s till the 1980s.

The first phase belonged to a courageous tackling of new themes by writers adopting English as a medium of expression while adapting to the perspective of Romantic involvement. The second phase had a broader scope under the influence of the political upsurge in which writing in English played a secondary role to that of other Indian languages. It joined the literary mainstream of India and took to fiction significantly. In the third phase, the post-independent India, it took a more well-defined form of modernist and realist to begin with and postcolonial and market driven as well as academic later.

Historically, India was not a nation to begin with; it was a subcontinent which harbored diverse religions, territories, cultures and languages. This diverse nature aided the well-organized colonial regime in getting a strong hold over the subcontinent by playing one community against the other like in a game of chess. The Indian masses had no access to concepts like equality, freedom and dignity. They were illiterate, orthodox and ignorant, divided along caste, while believing in the might of God as the one who maintains balance and happiness. Against such a background, the major themes were emancipation from the foreign rule, need of a new fervor as well as passion across villages and towns, and finally, persistence of critical attitude towards the everlasting prejudices and the irrational superstitious beliefs of the Indian masses. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan wrote along these themes respectively.

In the first part of the nineteenth century, the use of English language was practiced by the few people in a position of power. The language belonged to the ruling group and therefore bore a label of authority at the time. In a policy statement on education in India called Minutes was delivered by Macaulay in 1835 where he dramatically gives his opinion on the importance of oriental learning:

I have no knowledge of ether Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. (Macaulay, 1835)

This comparison between the west and the east is indicative of the importance of compartmentalization of the colonizer and the colonized position. In Orientalism, Said suggest that the "orient" is a European invention in order to understand what exactly the "occident" stands for. Borrowing from Michel Foucault's notion of a 'discourse', Said states that Orientalism is a mode of discourse which, for Foucault, is a way of constituting knowledge together with "social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations" (Foucault, 1976) which are inherited in such knowledge systems and the relations in between them. Therefore, for Said, orientalism is a discourse of the occident.

The introduction of western learning and English language, therefore, became a part of the western discourse and hegemony. Through education, the ruling power hoped to further this divide between the native and western learning while creating a stark hierarchy between them. The purpose of the colonizer was to generate a class, as Macaulay famously says, "who may be interpreters between us

and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." (Macaulay, 1835)

Initially, English was studied as a subject in India with grammar at the centre of it. It was introduced at a later stage, when the children had begun their learning in an Indian language. English was then learned through grammar and composition method and was instantly compared to the native language by the learners. The emphasis on the correct diction and grammar made the user look to the Englishman as a role model. English, established as a superior language, came to be associated with privilege and spoken English became a new trend to have proficiency in it. It was the contribution of a select few who formed a newer version of English, separate from the Standard English taught in schools, a form that established a vital connect with native dialects, folk literature, ancient myths and legends.

Indian English writing entered a phase of post-independence era where the focus of the writer shifted from the political and social issues to a more aesthetic zone. A change in emphasis was introduced and the language was being devoted to mental-biological processes as well as abstract philosophical concerns. Critics like Brice King emphasised the need of a "new start" in the fifties, taking the contemporary poetic expression to be possessing "a vital body." He highlighted the need for the new poetry to outshine the "outdated language" that the pre-independence poetry used. King underlines the change in themes and issues in the post-independent English poetry as a part of the larger framework of modernism. He calls the new poets "excited by their discovery of such late nineteenth-century and twentieth century poets as Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Auden..." (King, 2001).

Methodology

Writing in English or Englishes and Indian languages was an important issue in the literary world and the aspect of writing was constantly put under question. The writer wondered whether he was being true to his intent through a language, a medium, which had its roots elsewhere. On defining Indian English writing, Mulk Raj Anand, a well known writer of the field, states

I believe that Indian English writing has come to stay as a literature of the most vital character, like Irish English, American English, Welsh English, Australian English or Canadian English. It has the same advantage as those forms of English and similar disadvantages. (Anand, 1935)

Anand accords a vital space to Indian English literature in the post-independence era. He views English language as not an alien to Indian sensibilities but as one that has been integrated into the whole Indian lived experience. He maintains that English is an important component in the contemporary lives of Indians. English is no longer just a language of the coloniser, but with all its 'corruptions' and 'vulgarity' became as Indian as any other languages. It emerges as a language that can never truly become one's own, but is nevertheless a part of one's thinking and speaking systems. As Raja Rao writes in his foreword to *Kanthapura* (1938)

English is not an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as a part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the Americans. Time alone will justify it. (Rao, 1938)

For English language, Rao talks about the dissociation of the cultural baggage it carries. In his foreword, he further attempts to establish grounds for the notion of 'nation' separate from the European notion of 'nation' and 'nationhood.' Benedict Anderson talks about the notion of nation in his book *Imagined Communities* (1983). Here, he defines nation as "an imagined political community...and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." He elaborates that it is 'imagined' because the members of any nation can never personally know their fellow members yet there is an image of communion in their minds. The idea of nationhood and nationality became a vital question during the independence struggle with different political ideologies of political giants like Gandhi and Nehru.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is safe to say that postcolonialism as a branch of literature, history and culture has emerged as a representation of the subaltern and the orient as opposed to the Eurocentric discourses that demeans and derogates the authenticity as well as the legitimacy of the voice of the former. All these theorists talk about the same suppression and the lack of representation of these colonies who struggle with forming their own identity. Such counter narratives that write back to all those

old-fashioned perceptions of the occident who talk about the experiences of the colonies through their own conceptions and interpretations have given the representation that is required for the subaltern and marginalized classes.

English, as a language of the colonizer, emerged as a medium to offer this counter to the hegemonic Eurocentric discourses. The history of Indian writing in English throws light upon such usage which eventually evolves into a separate and more hybrid form of language. The issues of modernity and western science were creatively integrated with the Indian experience and wisdom, forming a healthy synthesis. Today, the usage of English in the lives of Indian masses, though has a colonial baggage, remains a corrupted and vulgar form of English that has been accepted as one of its own languages.

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